

Keepers of their Stories

story and photos by Tech. Sgt. Larry A. Simmons

National Museum
of the U.S. Air Force
keeps history alive



courtesy photo

courtesy photo



The "Heritage to Horizons: Commemorating 60 Years of Air & Space Power Through Artists' Eyes" exhibit is one of many at the museum.

As the Air Force commemorates 60 years of air and space power, the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force collects and preserves its heritage.



Staff Sgt. Patrick Roberson and his 10-year-old son, Justin, read a timeline of early aircraft in the museum's Early Years Gallery.

That is something Staff Sgt. Patrick Roberson, who is recuperating from an accident, explained to his 10-year-old son, Justin, as the boy slowly pushed his father's wheelchair past the museum's many exhibits.

The sergeant believes it is important to explain to his son the history of the Air Force and share his experiences in the Air Force he serves.

"This place is great, and everything looks incredible," said the sergeant, a safety Airman at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. "It is nice seeing this with my son."

The museum, located at Wright-Patterson, has hundreds of exhibits and aircraft that help tell the Air Force story.

The painstaking detail that goes into each exhibit provides visitors a vibrant glimpse into the history of the service and the aircraft it has used to dominate the skies. The intent is to make displays come to life and share their stories, museum volunteer Pete Britton said.

That is a job Mr. Britton loves to do. A retired Sailor, he grew up in the area and has been a regular museum visitor since he was eight years old.

Students work on a project during a home school day at the museum. The museum's education division, and its more than 30 volunteers, has several outreach programs to help schoolchildren learn about the Air Force and technology.



courtesy photo



"It was just my favorite place to go," he said.

Today, he is part of an army of volunteers who work at the museum helping preserve Air Force history. Mr. Britton said the museum — the world's largest and oldest military aviation museum — is important for two reasons.

"First, people today just don't have a sense of history," he said. "The other thing, there was a time when just about every American had some sort of connection to the military — a grandfather, father, son or someone that had served."

Today, with the military's all-volunteer force, Americans are beginning to disconnect more and more from the military, Mr. Britton said. Museum volunteers want to reestablish the link.

"They need a museum for that," he said.

Last year, the museum received more than a million visitors from around the world.

"Without a doubt, the museum has grown dramatically in both size and stature. The public interest in military aviation keeps us telling the stories in new and unique ways," said retired Maj. Gen. Charles Metcalf, the museum director.

With more than 300 aircraft and 17 acres of indoor space, the museum has exhibits in several different aviation — era galleries, many of them one-of-a-kind.

In the Air Power Gallery, for example, the bomber that dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki, the B-29 Superfortress "Bockscar," is a short walk from one of the B-25 Mitchell bombers that took part in the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo.

On display in the Cold War Gallery is the Air Force's largest bomber, the B-36 Peacemaker. The gallery also has the only permanent public display of the B-2 Spirit stealth bomber.

Other popular exhibits include the Air Force One, a VC-137C, that carried President John F. Kennedy's body back to Washington, D.C., after his assassination in Dallas. Also on display is the only remaining XB-70 Valkyrie. There are also sections of the Berlin Wall on display.

Restoration is vital in keeping all aircraft and missiles looking mission ready. That's where the volunteer force plays a big role. Many give hundreds of hours maintaining the exhibits.

This is evident at the display of the B-17F Flying Fortress, "Memphis Belle." This World War II aircraft was the first heavy bomber to complete 25 successful bombing missions over Europe. Museum officials said it may take up to 10 years to complete the bomber's restoration. Visitors can view the restoration process by taking one of the museum's behind-the-scenes tours.

The museum depends on its more than 450 volunteers. Most have a vast wealth of the military knowledge needed to guide visitors during their museum experience. They run information desks, monitor galleries, do restoration, and answer questions and pass on history. "Without the volunteers, the museum doesn't exist," General Metcalf said.

After visiting the museum, many Airmen view their Air Force heritage with a sense of renewed pride and understanding, said Doug Lanty, a museum historian.

Visitors learn about the legacy of former Airmen and their sacrifice and dedication. That is a testament to the museum's creed to be the "keeper of their stories," he said.

"I see the young Airmen visit and see them absorbing knowledge and having a good time while they do it," Mr. Lanty said. "It's a realization to know where the Air Force has been."

There are many things at the museum besides the inside exhibits. It also has a six-story, 500-seat IMAX theatre, a souvenir shop and 14-seat ride that gives the sensation of flying a fighter jet. Outside, there is an air park, with a World War II control tower and a memorial park.

With so much to see, the museum offers something for the whole family, the general said.

"Whether near or far, come visit us to experience the many stories the museum has to tell," he said. ✎

The museum's first exhibit is a self-tour area where uniforms and other items honor enlisted Airmen's heritage of the past 90 years. Doc Casto (below), a technician with the restoration shop, works on an exhibit for the B-17 Flying Fortress, "Memphis Belle."

